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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000547

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE SPLITS WORLD AZERBAIJANIS
CONGRESS

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Classified By: CDA Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Azerbaijani Member of Parliament Sabir Rustamxanli and current World Azerbaijanis Congress (WAC) President Ghulamriza Sabri-Tabrizi are both claiming leadership of the organization and organizing rival annual congresses. The organization's split appears to be driven by differences over the relative priority that should be given to "South Azerbaijani" rights or the foreign policy concerns of the Republic of Azerbaijan, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Tabrizi and other foreign-based board members claim that the Azerbaijani Government is backing Rustamxanli and actively interfering in diaspora affairs. End Summary.

A New Direction for the WAC?

¶2. (C) Following a February 2 meeting of the WAC Board of Directors in Brussels, board member and Azerbaijani MP Sabir Rustamxanli declared publicly that he had been elected the new president of the WAC. According to other participants at the Brussels meeting, including WAC President Ghulamriza Sabri-Tabrizi, no such vote took place. According to Tabrizi, the Brussels meeting covered only details of the reunification of the Demokratik Dunya Azerbaijan Kongresi (the North America-based faction of the WAC led by Ahmad Obali which broke off from the WAC a number of years ago) and the WAC. Board members voted in favor of unification (11-3), over the reportedly vocal opposition of Rustamxanli and former WAC President Javad Derakhti. Tabrizi said this was the only vote at the Brussels meeting.

¶3. (C) At an April 30 inaugural meeting of the WAC's "Azerbaijan Branch" in Baku, Rustamxanli reiterated claims that he had been elected WAC President. Critical of the WAC's focus on "South Azerbaijan" and historic leadership by a South Azerbaijani, Rustamxanli said that the "new" WAC needed to appeal to a wider range of Azeris by countering "Armenian propaganda," becoming "more representative," and holding an annual congress in Cologne, Germany May 23-25 (and separate from a planned June 20-22 congress in Brussels under the leadership of Tabrizi). To make the WAC "more representative," Rustamxanli suggested that co-presidents - one South Azerbaijani and one Azerbaijani - be elected in order to ensure that both major constituencies of the WAC were represented. While saying that he did not want to shift the "capitol from Tabriz to Baku," Rustamxanli argued repeatedly that WAC "values" needed to more closely match those of its (Azerbaijani) membership.

14. (C) In a May 1 meeting, Azerbaijani WAC member and deputy head of the new WAC "Azerbaijan Branch" Adil Minbashi claimed that Tabrizi had been removed from office because he had acted "undemocratically," allegedly accepted funding from Iran, and because Azerbaijanis "needed to have a bigger say" in the future direction of the WAC. Beyond an inability to provide any details supporting his claims that Tabrizi was receiving funding and guidance from Iran, Minbashi could not explain the process by which Rustamxanli had "democratically" become president, let alone which board members had allegedly sided with Rustamxanli and voted to oust Tabrizi.

Tabrizi on Recent Developments

15. (C) Rebuking Rustamxanli's claims, Tabrizi and other European-based board members reiterated charges that the Government of Azerbaijan (GOAJ) was actively interfering in diaspora affairs. According to Tabrizi, Rustamxanli contacted a number of WAC board members by telephone shortly after the February meeting (and unification decision), asking them to consider removing Tabrizi. Tabrizi said that the majority of board members contacted by Rustamxanli turned down his request, suggesting instead that he put it to a vote at the next annual meeting of the WAC scheduled for June 20-22 in Brussels. Unsuccessful in his efforts to remove Tabrizi in this fashion, Tabrizi said that he believes Rustamxanli then decided to call for a competing annual meeting - to be held prior to the scheduled June Brussels meeting - in order to remove Tabrizi.

16. (C) According to Tabrizi, Rustamxanli would not have acted in such an aggressive fashion if he did not have the full backing of Presidential Executive Apparatus head Ramiz

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Mehdiyev and Committee for Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad head Nazim Ibrahimov. Tabrizi attributes Mehdiyev and Ibrahimov's decision to back Rustamxanli to two things. First, Tabrizi has reportedly turned down numerous attempts by Ibrahimov and other GOAJ figures to influence the direction of the WAC (reftel). In addition to being unhappy that they were unable to influence Tabrizi by financial means, Tabrizi believes that certain elements within the GOAJ want diaspora groups to focus their efforts on advancing Azerbaijani foreign policy goals - specifically with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict - vice focusing on the plight of ethnic Azeris in Iran. Tabrizi went on to assert that by keeping diaspora groups ineffective and divided, the GOAJ can more easily maintain its influence and control over these groups and the direction of their efforts.

And Rustamxanli's Take

17. (C) Rustamxanli told Iran Watcher in a June 11 meeting that he was the democratically-elected president of the WAC and was angered by "others misrepresenting themselves and the organization." According to Rustamxanli, the WAC's Board of Directors had elected him new WAC President in a 12 to 4 vote in Brussels. Saying that "too many South Azerbaijanis had become alienated from the WAC" and that the organization "needed to be cleaned of troublemakers," Rustamxanli claimed that Tabrizi had been removed from office because he had not been able to get along with other board members and "meets with people from Iran." Rustamxanli also claimed that unification of DDAK with the WAC had not been agreed to at the Brussels meeting.

18. (C) Concerning the WAC's recent Cologne, Germany congress, Rustamxanli said that four major issues were discussed by WAC members and representatives of the Turkish diaspora. During the three-day meeting reportedly covered by Turkish STAR TV and a number of Germany-based Turkish newspapers, Rustamxanli said that discussions had focused on the political situation of Azeris in Iran, the 90th

anniversary of the founding of the first Azerbaijani Republic, Armenian aggression and the role of the diaspora, and integration problems of Azeris and Turks abroad. With regard to the competing WAC congress scheduled for June 20-22 in Brussels, Rustamxanli said that he would not be in attendance as it "was not the legitimate congress of the WAC." According to Rustamxanli, the June meeting in Brussels would most likely only be attended by Tabrizi and the "2 to 3 board members who still support him" and DDAK's leadership, including Ahmad Obali.

¶9. (C) Rustamxanli reported that he would be traveling to Brussels in the near future to celebrate the opening of a WAC Brussels office. The office, staffed by three employees, will serve as an Azerbaijani information center, coordinate Azeri diaspora activities, and inform Brussels-based European bodies. Saying that the WAC was now "no longer under the Mullah umbrella," Rustamxanli said that the WAC would be a "financially independent" organization. Rustamxanli said the WAC would be financially independent, supported only by its membership (with Rustamxanli saying that Russia-based Azeri businessmen were especially generous). Rustamxanli said that the WAC would accept no funds from the State Committee for Azerbaijanis Living Abroad or any other GOAJ entity during his tenure.

Comment

¶10. (C) The result of this infighting appears to have left the WAC membership roughly evenly divided between pro-Tabrizi and pro-Rustamxanli camps, with many ordinary members still either unaware of what transpired or unsure of who they will ultimately support. For now, camps appear to be divided along geographic lines, with most Azerbaijan-based WAC members supporting Rustamxanli while a majority of diaspora members seem to support Tabrizi.

¶11. (C) While it remains unclear whether the GOAJ played any role in what transpired, a north-side divide appears to have reemerged in the WAC and other influential Azeri diaspora groups. The South Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (or SANAM - one of the largest Azeri diaspora groups next to the WAC) has reportedly experienced a similar internal debate, brought about by a 2006 Baku conference which generated considerable Iranian criticism of both the organization and

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its Azerbaijani hosts. Since then, SANAM has been plagued by public disagreements over its direction, whether to focus on the plight of South Azerbaijan (as Chairman Chehraganli desires) or more Azerbaijan-centric issues such as "Armenian terror." We expect that the WAC will follow this trend.

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